

# An American Girl the Center of Berlin's War Scandal

**Ambassador Bernstorff's Son Accused of Debauching Baron Radeck's American Wife. While the Baron Was in the Trenches and of Being Too Cowardly to Fight the Customary Duel**



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The Countess Christian von Bernstorff, Formerly Miss Marguerite Thomason, of Burlington, N. J., at the Time She Was Voted the Most Beautiful Girl at the New Jersey Summer Resorts.



A Recent Picture of Countess Christian von Bernstorff, the American Girl, Who Is Now the Central Figure in Germany's Great War Scandal.

A SOCIAL scandal born of war conditions is raging in Berlin, perhaps the worst of many that have revealed that city as the real modern Babylon.

Baron Walter von Radeck, of the German Army, slapped the face of young Count Christian von Bernstorff, son of the former German Ambassador to the United States, when he found him in the company of the Baron's American wife. Young von Bernstorff, though grossly insulted, refused to fight a duel, as German traditions require, but suggested that von Radeck let his wife get a divorce so that the Count could marry her.

Baron von Radeck charges that the great Bernstorff family influence was used to run him and that hosts of titled young men, like von Bernstorff, are living safely and luxuriously in Berlin and amusing themselves with the wives of soldiers fighting at the front.

The German newspapers received by way of Amsterdam, Holland, reveal an amazing story of disgrace and degradation in the notorious ex-Ambassador's family. Some references to it have already been made by cable, but they give only an imperfect idea of the shameful evidence brought forth by lawsuits concerning the corruption of German high society. A divorce suit against Radeck and a libel suit by Radeck against Bernstorff and his friends are among the channels by which the exposures have been made public.

In this affair, unfortunately, a lovely American girl, once widely popular and admired in American society, is profoundly involved. She was formerly Miss Marguerite Vivian Burton Thomason, of Burlington, N. J. As a child of eight she was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Thomason, wealthy residents of that city. She grew up a lovely girl of a perfect blonde type, with exquisitely formed features and a superb figure. Some years ago she received a prize in a newspaper contest as the most beautiful girl at the New Jersey Summer resorts. Many persons then pronounced her the most beautiful girl they had ever seen.

Miss Thomason was first married to an American, James H. Birch, Jr. They disagreed in a short time and she obtained a divorce. After that she went to London to live. She had already made many friends among the Diplomatic Corps in Washington, and she was welcomed in the same social class abroad.

In London she met Baron Walter von Radeck, a young nobleman attached to the German Embassy in that city. He fell violently in love with the beautiful American and they were married within a few months. That was in 1912. For two years they enjoyed a brilliant social life in England, where the beautiful bride was extremely popular and the young husband well liked, in spite of the growing menace of conflict between England and Germany.

In 1914, on the outbreak of war, Baron von Radeck returned to Germany to perform his military duties. He took his

beautiful wife home with him, and while he went to the front left her to the care of his friends in Berlin.

Among these good friends was young Count Christian von Bernstorff. He had known the Baroness in American society when he was living in the United States and she was a famous Summer resort beauty. The Count lived in this country during part of his father's term as Ambassador. About 1911 he worked as a clerk for Speyer & Co, the bankers, of New York, in order to learn the banking business. He is a rather good looking but slender and effeminate young man. He is only twenty-six years old now.

Baron von Radeck, while fighting at the front, was amazed to receive a letter from his beloved wife declaring that she no longer loved him and wished to be free. He obtained leave of absence and returned to Berlin to learn what the trouble was.

He found quickly that his wife had been constantly in the company of Count Christian von Bernstorff. This young man, it should be stated, though nominally an officer and enjoying the privilege of wearing a military uniform, had escaped all danger of getting hurt in the war. Through his father's influence he had obtained a desk position in the Berlin Foreign Office, and this left him plenty of leisure to devote to pleasures of various kinds, including the pursuit of other men's wives.

He has great wealth and maintains several luxurious apartments in Berlin and villas in the country.

Baron von Radeck, acting according to the code observed by German officers, first denounced Bernstorff's conduct to a court of officers and challenged Bernstorff to a duel. He received no answer.

He then traced his wife to Bernstorff's apartments in the Habsburger Hof and forced his way into the building. He broke open the door of the room they occupied and found them together.

The Baron was in a great rage and denounced the Count passionately.

As the Baron proceeded with his denunciation and Count von Bernstorff made no effort to explain or defend himself, his rage increased. Young Bernstorff affected to treat the Baron with contempt, but grew pale and trembling before his anger. The Baron used the words already quoted and many more besides.

"You are a low person. You have taken

money from women. I cannot fight you," retorted von Bernstorff.

Finally Baron von Radeck slapped Bernstorff's face, tore off one of his epaulets, took his revolver from him and said:

"You contemptible cur! While I was fighting in the trenches you sat safely at a desk position in Berlin and debauched my wife in my absence. I slap your cowardly face, but you refuse to be insulted. I should have known that such a dog would not have manhood enough to accept my challenge to a duel."

Throughout this interview Count von Bernstorff behaved in a most cowardly manner. He did little but implore his assailant to go away and not make a scene before a lady. The angry husband left him, bruised, tattered and dishevelled, upon a sofa.

After this the Baron confidently expected that he would receive a challenge to a duel, for it seemed under the German code of "military honor" no man could show his face in German society after receiving such insults. The Baron promptly communicated the facts to a "court of honor," according to the German custom, and awaited the result. To his amazement, Count von Bernstorff, instead of sending him a challenge, came to him very humbly in two days and said:

"Let's settle this matter in a friendly way. It's ridiculous to fight duels over such matters. Let your wife get a divorce from you, so that I can marry her. We will take care of you financially and in every other way. But if you give me more trouble, remember that I can make life worse than death for you!"

Radeck's answer to the disgraceful proposal was to kick Count von Bernstorff out of his presence. From that time the Baron's troubles began to grow worse.

Radeck appealed to General von Moltke, the commander of his military district, for satisfaction and, was coldly informed that his standing did not entitle him to fight a duel with Count Christian von Bernstorff. The Baron was an officer of the Cuirassier Guards, one of the Kaiser's crack cavalry

regiments, and claims that he fought with distinction in the terrible battles at Ypres and elsewhere in Flanders. He says he realized that the great Bernstorff family influence was being used on behalf of a young poltroon to discredit him, an honorable soldier.

At the same time a divorce suit was begun by the Baroness von Radeck against her husband. The case was entirely managed by the Bernstorff family, and it is possible that the Baroness understood little, if anything, of the charges that were made against her husband. She asked a divorce on the ground of cruelty.

The Bernstorff supporters also asserted that the Baron had been guilty of misconduct with a number of women, that he had preyed upon them and that he had maintained particularly disgraceful relations with a Viennese Countess. They also attacked his private life in other ways. They referred to his popularity in England to insinuate that he was an English spy. They said that he had no right to the title of Baron.

The court listened only to the evidence against Radeck and paid no attention to his defense. The divorce was granted in October, 1917, and the divorced Baroness was promptly married to Count Christian von Bernstorff in December of the same year.

The plot to ruin Baron von Radeck did not stop there. The army authorities made the divorce and the various charges a ground for dismissing him from the army in disgrace. His enemies put all the charges against him into a pamphlet, setting them forth in the grossest manner. This, he says, they circulated anonymously. According to this record he appears to be fully as undesirable as young von Bernstorff.

Baron von Radeck then brought a suit for libel against Count Christian von Bernstorff and sixteen other persons, most of whom are of the highest position in Berlin society, while a few belong to the fashionable "demi-monde."



Count Bernstorff Who Couldn't Be Sufficiently Insulted to Fight a Duel with Baron von Radeck

Among Count von Bernstorff's distinguished co-defendants are Prince Albert of Schleswig-Holstein, a relative of the Kaiser, and now, strange to say, safely lodged in a sanitarium; Herr von Kuehlmann, brother of the Imperial Foreign Minister; Captain von Hoff, of the Great General Staff at Berlin; Professor Schott, a prominent Berlin sculptor, and his wife; Baron Ohlem, Baroness Palkenhauser, wife of a noted general; Baroness von Beaulieu-Marcconnay, and others.

Baron von Radeck says that he is fighting for the right to return to the army as an officer. His father was a noted German general and there is no doubt about his distinguished family connections, although his enemies assert that he has no right to call himself Baron. He threatens to make exposures which will disgrace Germans of high rank as no scandal has ever done before.

The divorce case and the libel suit have directed attention to much that is rotten in German society. Above the slaughter of the front and the misery and starvation of the people in general there is a large upper class that is living with unusual luxury and recklessness. Young von Bernstorff was a typical figure in this set. The Rheinische Westfälische Zeitung and other leading newspapers have given a great deal of space to the affair and it is apparently being made a serious cause of dissatisfaction against the ruling classes.

It is alleged that gilded youths of the privileged classes, wearing uniforms but relieved from all danger are spending

their days and nights in reckless dissipation and that their companions are too often the wives of men who are fighting and dying at the front.

Baron von Radeck states that he complained to the older Count von Bernstorff, now Ambassador at Constantinople, that his son was lavishing costly gifts and conspicuous attention on his wife, but that noted diplomat paid no attention to him.

Sorrow will naturally be expressed in America that an American girl should be associated with the most corrupt element in German society. She might be excused for marrying a German nobleman before the war, but that after the United States should enter the conflict she should marry another German seems incredible. That she should marry the son of the German Ambassador who had been convicted of plotting against the United States with diabolical ingenuity seems even more shocking.

Edward J. Thomason, her foster father, who still lives at Burlington, N. J., and feels great interest in her, expressed sorrow when he heard the news of her latest marriage.

"I am not at all pleased," he said. "Von Bernstorff may be Marguerite's ideal, but she must bear in mind that he is a German and an enemy now."

Marguerite Thomason is remembered by her friends as a fascinating girl, though somewhat erratic. She was born in Maryland of an English father and American mother.

Her original foster mother was so fond of her that on her death she bequeathed her large fortune entirely to the Baroness, leaving to her husband only the family mansion at No. 212 High street, Burlington. It was this large fortune which enabled the young beauty to enjoy a prominent social position as a Baroness both in England and Germany. Her foster father has married again since his wife's death.

For several seasons Marguerite Thomason enjoyed a picturesque social career in Southern New Jersey and Philadelphia. Her first husband, James H. Birch, was the son of a millionaire carriage manufacturer of Burlington. He was quite noted as a traveller, and his brother, Colonel Thomas Birch, has been Minister to Portugal. This marriage ended quickly and unhappily.

Mrs. Thomason-Birch then plunged into the European career that has made her the central figure in a strange drama of German imperial corruption.